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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5525  
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE  
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0076  
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 4418  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3669  
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 7174  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4759  
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 0998  
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 1001  
RUDKIA/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0771  
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2978  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0641

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 001814

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS; PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/19/2016

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL BM

SUBJECT: RESTRICTING PRAYERS FOR AUNG SAN SUU KYI

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Classified By: Poloff Dean Tidwell for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: After Shwedagon Pagoda officials harassed worshippers in November at their weekly prayers for Aung San Suu Kyi, thirteen participants wrote a letter of complaint to regime leaders. Authorities ordered the worshippers to request advance permission for future prayers, but allowed them to continue their weekly practice in December. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Naw Ohn Hla, a Karen Buddhist and staunch follower of Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK), and a small number of ASSK supporters have gathered to pray at the Shwedagon Pagoda each week on 127 separate Tuesdays since July 13, 2004. They gather at the Tuesday shrine dedicated for those born on Tuesdays (ASSK was born on Tuesday) to pray for the release of ASSK and all political prisoners, and for all who experience personal difficulties.

¶3. (U) On November 7, members of the Shwedagon Pagoda Trustees Board ordered Naw Ohn Hla and approximately fourteen other worshippers to their office. The trustees told them they could not conduct religious activities at the pagoda on behalf of just one person. They said that since the worshippers were not all born on Tuesday, they should worship at their individual day shrines. The trustees alleged that they could not continuously carry out weekly prayers without clandestine support. The trustees also threatened to make legal charges against the worshippers. Naw Ohn Hla asked why they restricted them now but let them pray 127 times before. The trustees did not reply and abruptly ended the meeting.

¶4. (C) On the following Tuesday, November 14, when the worshippers went to pray at the Shwedagon Pagoda, the eastern entrance gate was closed. Pagoda security guards and others wearing no uniform informed them that they could not enter the pagoda, so the group said prayers near the closed gate.

According to Naw Ohn Hla, Lieutenant Colonel Thein Hteik Oo of the Rangoon Military Command appeared to spearhead the opposition to the worshippers.

¶15. (U) On November 21, the group was again blocked at the same gate and a group of nearly thirty people, including pagoda guards and persons in plain clothes, said they could say prayers at the pagoda's perimeter, near the giant guardian lions. The worshippers moved to the lions and started to pray, but the guards and others in plain clothes followed them and disturbed their prayers by shouting and clapping loudly.

¶16. (U) The worshippers decided to write letters to Senior General Than Shwe and to the Patron Monk of the State Sangha (Buddhist Monk) Committee complaining about the harassment. They mailed the letter to Than Shwe on November 24 and Naw Ohn Hla personally delivered the letter to the Patron Monk on November 27. The letters explained that the worshippers were praying peacefully and they had no intention to make a disturbance.

¶17. (U) When the worshippers visited the Shwedagon on November 28, authorities did not try to block them, but instead ordered them to go to the Trustees Board office for discussions. The trustees read some rules and ordered the worshippers to request permission in writing three days in advance of future religious activities. Naw Ohn Hla believes this order pertains to organizations that want to conduct religious activities, not individuals. However, to highlight the trustees' harassment of individual worshipers, she submitted an application.

¶18. (U) Naw Ohn Hla wrote an application to the Shwedagon Pagoda Trustees on December 3 requesting to pray on Tuesday, December 5. She sent copies of the application to Senior

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General Than Shwe, the Patron Monk of the State Sangha Committee, the Prime Minister, the Rangoon Mayor, the Minister of Religious Affairs, and the Minister of Home Affairs. The pagoda trustees returned her letter and reprimanded her for only requesting permission for herself and not for the group, as the trustees had ordered. She explained that the group has no leader, therefore she could not request for the group, but only for herself. So far, the worshippers have been able to gather every Tuesday in December without incident.

¶19. (C) COMMENT: The activities of Naw Ohn Hla and like-minded worshippers have placed the regime in a quandary. Since the regime regularly publicizes its strong support of Buddhism, restrictions on prayers at a pagoda are hard to defend. If she becomes enough of a threat or irritant, Naw Ohn Hla may face arrest for violation of some law totally unrelated to her religious activities, to quiet her support of ASSK. END COMMENT.

VILLAROSA